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Review of Bad Boy of Gospel Music: The Calvin Newton Story, by Russ Cheatham

Rebecca Tolley

East Tennessee State University, tolleyst@etsu.edu

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Review of Bad Boy of Gospel Music: The Calvin Newton Story, by Russ Cheatham

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Marshall Chapman compares Nashville in the early 1970s to Paris in the 1920s as described by Ernest Hemingway in *A Moveable Feast*. Just as Hemingway made even the less attractive aspects of Paris appealing, Chapman does the same for Nashville. Perhaps this is due to her ability to bring to life a whole cast of characters. My own favorite is Neil Cargile, who was wearing Brooks Brothers from the waist up, with a kilt, panty hose, and gold lamé spiked heels from the waist down the first time Marshall met him.

Anybody who reads Marshall Chapman's book should expect to experience a whole gamut of emotions. There are instances of sheer silliness, but there are also episodes that are told in such a humorous voice that it takes a moment before the reader realizes that they are really sad or scary. As a bonus, the reader will be treated to some great descriptions of the songwriting art. Although *Goodbye, Little Rock and Roller* is not a necessary purchase, it sure would be an entertaining purchase for a music collection in a public or academic library.

Kathy Campbell

Sherrod Library/Reference

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Cheatham, Russ. ***Bad Boy of Gospel Music: The Calvin Newton Story***. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003. 342 pp.

Cheatham's entertaining biography charts Newton's rise in gospel music, his performance in the Oak Ridge Quartet and Sons of Song, and examines his decline into amphetamine addiction and felony convictions. The book concludes with the singer's ultimate redemption as a family man and a twice honored inductee of the Gospel Music Hall of Fame, and his designation as a Living Legend by the Grand Ole Opry Gospel Reunion.

Through Newton's various incarnations as gospel singer, Golden Gloves boxing champion, Korean War Army medic, rock 'n' roll singer, career criminal, and felon, the reader gains a sense that despite his talent and charisma, his rebellion against his background as a Pentecostal preacher's kid derailed a successful musical career. Although his self-destructive path into substance abuse and six felony convictions in twenty years made him a career criminal, his love of singing and return to God during his second prison term offered deliverance from his poor judgment.

Combining his expertise as an associate professor of criminal justice at Cumberland University with his interest in music, the author, a contributor to Bluegrass Unlimited and Music Row Magazine, constructs a thorough accounting of his subject's life, often offering psychological analysis of Newton's motivations and subsequent criminal behavior. Newton's story is inextricably bound with the history of Southern gospel music, and Cheatham sheds light on this subculture by assembling information from secondary sources that describe the era. His knowledge of the dynamics between various gospel groups and the Southern gospel music circuit of the 1950s reveals a complete picture of the industry. Extensive oral interviews allow intricate reconstruction of Newton's activities from multiple perspectives, which translates into richly detailed settings and scenes that

immerse the reader in the story.

Organized chronologically in short chapters, the information is presented clearly. Cheatham's writing style is peppered with humor and his frequent incorporation of colloquial phrases grounds the work in its subject's roots. Besides Cheatham's interviews, he draws on newspapers and prison records obtained via the Freedom of Information Act, which shed light on Newton's reformed character during his incarceration in Atlanta's federal prison. While the first few chapters may confuse a reader who is not familiar with Southern gospel groups or may not comprehend a group's significance, Newton's story appeals to country and gospel music fans and historians, as well as ethnomusicologists and general music historians. Countering the dearth of southern gospel musician biographies, this essential purchase for libraries with strong traditional music collections is one of several first-rate publications on the topic.

Rebecca Tolley-Stokes

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Cobia, Manley F. Jr. ***Journey into the Land of Trials: The Story of Davy Crockett's Expedition to the Alamo.*** Franklin, Tenn.: Hillsboro Press, 2003. 274 pp.

In *Journey into the Land of Trials: The Story of Davy Crockett's Expedition to the Alamo*, Manley F. Cobia, Jr., graduate of Florida International University and Alamo Society member, chronicles the story of the legendary Davy Crockett's journey from Tennessee to Texas. One of Cobia's primary goals in crafting this work is to separate the fictional Davy Crockett, created by Disney in their *Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier* mini-series and others, from the historical figure. Using extensive primary resources, Cobia is able to paint a vivid portrait of the real David Crockett and the true motivations behind his journey to Texas.

The book is arranged in chronological order, following Crockett from the end of his Congressional career until his death at the Alamo. The work is well written and well documented with copious endnotes. Cobia does a good job of setting Crockett within the larger American political and social scene and explaining Crockett's actions within that larger picture. Also included are a thorough index, an introduction, and a thoughtful conclusion as well as a number of photos and other images.

One of the work's strengths is that Cobia carefully examines and builds on previous research, including *Col. Crockett's Exploits and Adventures in Texas, Written by Himself*, already in its twelfth printing by its second year of publication. Cobia uses all available resources including eyewitnesses, and he meticulously works out inconsistencies and inaccuracies in an attempt to separate the folklore from fact. Overall, this is a highly recommended work for all academic and public libraries.

Lisa A. Ennis